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Before the bulldozers come

DNR proposes to save woods, wetlands

By DON BEHM
of the Journal Sentinel staff

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The state Department of Natural Resources is seeking authority to preserve thousands of acres of forests and wetlands along the north branch of the Milwaukee River and five tributary streams in Ozaukee, Washington and Sheboygan counties.

A proposed 21,369-acre North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area would provide outdoor recreation and protect wildlife habitat within one of the largest blocks of undeveloped land in southeastern Wisconsin, the department says in a draft feasibility report released Monday.

The fast pace of population growth and rural residential development in northern Ozaukee and Washington counties prompted the DNR last year to study whether it would still be possible to establish a large conservation and recreation area about 20 miles from the

If You Go

Open house-style public informational meetings are planned from 5 to 9 p.m. on three dates for a proposed 21,369-acre North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area.

Thursday: Farmington Town Hall, 9422 Highway 144, north of Boltonville.

Nov. 14: Silver Creek Volunteer Fire Department, Highway 144 in Silver Creek.


Nov. 15: Fredonia Town Hall, W4114 River St., Waukegan.

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Milwaukee area.

W4114 River St., Waubeka.

The study concludes that large expanses of woods, wetlands and agricultural land could be assembled within the next decade if the department works in cooperation with farm organizations, municipalities and land trusts.

"We want to prevent widespread residential development throughout the area and maintain agriculture as the dominant land use outside of the wetland areas," said Dale Katsma, a wildlife biologist with the DNR in Plymouth and a member of the study team.

Both the state Natural Resources Board and Gov. Tommy G. Thompson would be asked to approve the plan in 2001.

The feasibility report will be discussed at three informational meetings this month.

Each meeting will be from 5 to 9 p.m. The schedule is: Thursday, Farmington Town Hall, 9422 Highway 144, north of Boltonville; Nov. 14, Silver Creek Volunteer Fire Department, Highway 144 in Silver Creek; and Nov. 15, Fredonia Town Hall, W4114 River St., Waubeka.

Copies of the report also are available for public review at the Farmington, Fredonia, Scott and Sherman town halls, the Fredonia and Random Lake village hall, the Random Lake, Sheboygan and West Bend libraries, and DNR offices at Plymouth and Milwaukee.

"Public ownership of land within the North Branch study area would open miles of shoreline and many acres of wetlands to anglers, canoeists, hikers and wildlife watchers," the report says.

The proposed heritage area to be targeted for future acquisition or easements would encompass 12 miles of shoreline along the Milwaukee River's North Branch and adjacent floodplain forests, two miles along the Milwaukee River west of Waubeka, three lakes and 22 natural areas that have not been significantly altered by development.

The draft plan recommends purchase of conservation easements along five tributary streams. They are Mink, Batavia, Stony, Silver and Wallace creeks.

"Opportunities to preserve open space and wildlife habitat, and to restore wetlands and critical wildlife habitat will decrease" as development expands in the area, the study concludes.

The plan notes that current expansion of state Highway 57 between Fredonia and the Sheboygan County line is a harbinger of development.

"Plans to improve Highway 57 will undoubtedly increase the pressure to sell farmland and the few remaining upland woods for residential and commercial development," the study says.